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No. 172

A BOY'S PROPOSAL

A Little Comedy in One Act

BY

ARTHUR ECKERSLEY

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Produced at the Adelphi Theatre, London, on Monday, March
29, 1909, with the following cast.

A BOY'S PROPOSAL.

CHARACTERS.

Mr. Augustus Sheringham (a
bachelor) Mr. Hubert Willis
Tom (his nephew, aged 14) . . Master Philip Tonge
Lady Pilkington (a widow) . . . Miss May Chevalier
Dean . . , ... Mr. P. L. Julian

SCENE.—Lady Pilkington's drawing-room. —Time:
an afternoon in June. A pleasant, handsomely fur-
nished room, very feminine and dainty. Flowers
everywhere. R. in flat a door giving into hall. L. 2 E.
another door to boudoir. Window R. 2 E. In the
left upper angle of the room a fireplace with bell
beside it. Sofa down stage R. c. below window. Easy-
chair L. c. Small chair c. Tea-table, and wicker
cake stand with cakes, etc., R. c. above corner of sofa,
subsequently moved by Dean down to L. c. beside
chair. Writing-table up c. against back wall. Various
small tables and chairs.

N. B.—The directions are given for the right and
left of the performers, not the audience.

PROPERTIES.

Usual drawing-room furniture to include sofa and
easy-chair.

Tea-table.

Cake-stand with cakes and bread and butter.

Tea-things for three on tray.

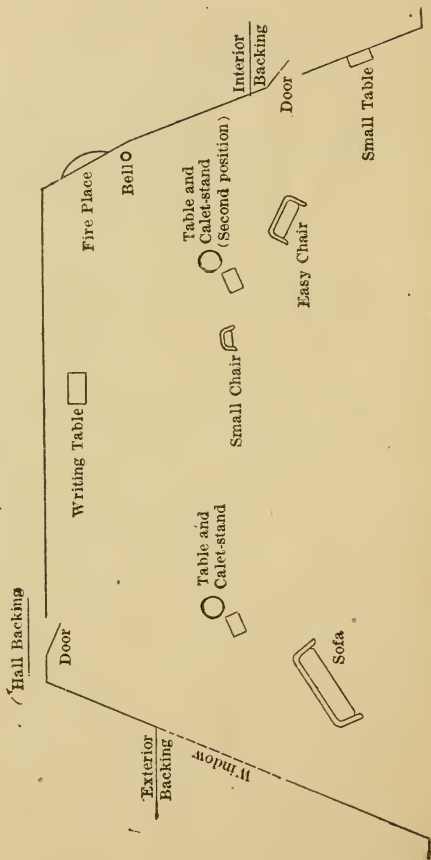
Dish of hot toast.
Writing-table.
Bell, beside fireplace.

HAND PROPERTIES.

Letter for Sheringham.
Watch for Tom.
Letter in writing-table for Lady Pilkington.
Cab-whistle (off).

A BOY'S PROPOSAL

PLAN OF STAGE



A BOY'S PROPOSAL.

SCENE—*Drawing-Room of Lady Pilkington's Flat in Sloane Gardens. Time about 4 p. m. As the curtain rises, DEAN, a genial, elderly butler, enters R. C. showing in Mr. SHERINGHAM. MR. SHERINGHAM is a florid portly little gentleman about 40, dressed in the height of afternoon-calling fashion. At present he appears much agitated.*

DEAN. We expect her ladyship back every moment, sir. Will you kindly take a seat, and I'll tell her directly she comes in.

SHERINGHAM. Thank you. (*coming down*) If you will be so good. Tell her that Mr.—(*Looking about him anxiously*)

DEAN. (*smiling*) I know the name, Mr. Sheringham.

SHERINGHAM. Ah! of course, of course, Dean. I didn't recognise you for the moment. I am a little upset! (*testily*) Where on earth is that boy?

DEAN. The little gentleman stopped in the Hall to look at something, sir.

SHERINGHAM. Tutt! Tutt! (*calling*) Tom! Tom!

TOM. (*outside*) All right. (*he appears in doorway*) I say, Uncle Gus, there's such a spiffing sword out here.

DEAN. (*beaming*) Ah, that was one of the late Sir Geoffrey's swords, sir.

TOM. (*to him*) Can I get it down?

DEAN. (*a little scandalized*) Well, sir, we must see what her ladyship has to say to that.

SHERINGHAM. (*interposing angrily*) Nonsense! Of course you can do no such thing. Come in at once.

TOM. (*entering*) All right. You needn't get shirty, I asked.

DEAN. Perhaps, sir, the young gentleman would like a piece of cake while he is waiting. I'm sure my lady would wish it. (*hands cake-stand R. C. to TOM*).

SHERINGHAM. Thank you. No. The young gentleman would like nothing of the kind.

TOM. (*taking cake*) I say, Uncle Gus, you do tell 'em. (*very politely to DEAN*) Thank you very much.

DEAN. (*delighted with him*) Thank you, sir. There's nothing in it to hurt, Mr. Sheringham. I'll tell her ladyship directly she returns. (*exit R. C.*)

SHERINGHAM. (*walking up and down furious*) Upon my word, sir. Upon my word! You seem to have absolutely no sense whatever of the position in which we at present stand.

TOM. (*munching cake. Seated on sofa R. C.*) You stand.

SHERINGHAM. Don't prevaricate. If you are unable to appreciate the consequences of what you have done, you might at least have the decency to assume regret. (*threateningly*) And let me tell you, sir, that before I have finished with this affair you will have no difficulty in doing so.

TOM. (*sulkily*) I've said I'm sorry.

SHERINGHAM. Sorry! Bah!

TOM. I don't know what more I could be.

SHERINGHAM. You have committed deliberate forgery.

TOM (*rises*) I only meant it as a joke.

SHERINGHAM. A joke, sir, for which older and—er—wiser men than you have been transported. However (*with resignation*) I knew how it would end. Ever since you developed that pernicious practice of imitating other people's handwriting I have prophesied that it would lead to disaster. It has brought us—to this.

TOM. It wouldn't have brought me if I'd known where you were coming.

SHERINGHAM. Ah! It was for that very reason that I informed your head-master merely that I wished to take you out for a half-holiday.

TOM. Sneak! If I'd known I'd have been bilious.

SHERINGHAM. Silence, sir, and why have I brought you here—?

TOM. (*sulky*) Oh, I know. To apologise.

SHERINGHAM. To apologise to the Lady whom your impudent forgery has so grievously insulted. (*magnanimously*) I say nothing about the injury to myself.

TOM. No. (*reflectively*) You said that part in the cab.

SHERINGHAM. Directly I received her letter I knew of whose abominable trickery it was the outcome. (*takes out letter and adjusts glasses*)

TOM. (*eyeing letter with apprehension*) Oh, Uncle Gus—you've read it twice to me already.

SHERINGHAM. (*glares at him*) Then I shall read it a third time. Perhaps—I say perhaps—it may help you to realise the enormity of your offence. (*reads*)

“DEAR MR. SHERINGHAM,

“Your letter only reached me this morning, but I am obeying your wish and replying to it with as little delay as possible. Perhaps it is unnecessary for me to say”—oh—(*speaks*)—er—that does not concern you—“But while fully sensible of the worth of what I renounce you must forgive me if it cannot be as your wish.”—er—(*skips*)—“permit me, however, to remain as before,

“Your sincere and attached friend,

“ANNETTE PILKINGTON.”

There! (*severely to TOM, who is endeavouring to stifle a grin*) That, sir, is the answer to a proposal, a proposal of marriage, which, as you know perfectly well, I never sent. It's fortunate that the consequence was—er—no worse!

TOM. Well, as it wasn't, what's the harm? She needn't ever know you didn't ask her.

SHERINGHAM. On the contrary, sir, that is precisely why we are here. In—in justice to myself I am now faced with the delicate, the disagreeable, the incredibly painful task of telling her so.

TOM. Wouldn't you do that better alone?

SHERINGHAM. I intend to do it alone, sir,—at least in the presence of Lady Pilkington. You will retire to an adjoining room. Afterwards, however, I shall demand from you the fullest possible apology to us both.

TOM. Well, if I must, I must. I say, Uncle, I'd like to hear you explaining.

SHERINGHAM. Tcht.

TOM. I suppose this makes it all gee-bust with that air-gun?

SHERINGHAM. What air-gun?

TOM. The one I was going to want for my next birthday—when you asked me.

SHERINGHAM. Decidedly, sir! I wonder you have the impertinence to mention it. After what has happened all questions of birthday-presents between us is emphatically—as you put it—Gee-bust.

TOM. I thought it would be. Anyway I wish she'd hurry up and get the thing over.

SHERINGHAM. Ah! You are at length beginning to appreciate the position.

TOM. I only meant, so as we could have tea afterwards.

SHERINGHAM. (*indignant*) Tea! Upon my word, sir, you are incredible! At such a moment you can think of tea! All I can say is your up-bringing has been peculiar. Time upon time I have warned your mother. My only regret is that this last exploit must of course be kept—ah—strictly private.

TOM. Yes. It would make you look rather silly, Uncle Gus, wouldn't it?

SHERINGHAM. Nothing of the sort, sir! I am unwilling to cause your mother pain, that is all.

TOM (*rises, surveying room*) I swear, this *is* a ripping room.

SHERINGHAM. (*shortly*) Naturally. Lady Pilkington is a woman of taste and refinement, for whom I have the highest regard. A fact which makes my present situation all the more appalling.

TOM. Must be pretty well off, too, isn't she?

SHERINGHAM. What has that to do with you?

TOM. Nothing. Only I was thinking it was almost a pity she wouldn't have you.

SHERINGHAM. Hold your tongue, sir!

TOM. (*reflectively*) I'm sure it was a nice enough letter.

SHERINGHAM. Ah! That's it! That's what I want to know, word for word. (*with an outburst*) What the Devil you said!

TOM. I don't think Mother would like me to hear words like Devil.

SHERINGHAM. You!—(*words fail him*) Tom, I ask you, as a personal favour, to tell me exactly what *my* letter to Lady Pilkington contained.

TOM. I can't remember exactly.

SHERINGHAM. Was it the sort of letter I might have written?

TOM. You might have written, yes. Only you were such a precious long time about it that I thought I'd hurry it up.

SHERINGHAM. Cht! Cht! It's quite true that Lady Pilkington and I are old friends. I might have written to her any time these ten years—only somehow I didn't. And now you rush in with this proposal of yours. Probably most indelicately expressed. My wonder is that Lady Pilkington replied to it at all.

TOM. Why? It was all right.

SHERINGHAM. All right?

TOM. Yes. I got bits of it out of a book I'm reading.

SHERINGHAM. What book?

TOM. Oh, a ripping one! "The Mystery of Blood!" it's called, "Or The Pirate's Bride."

SHERINGHAM (*horror-struck*) The Pirate's Bride! Great Heavens!

TOM. What's wrong with that? Do keep your hair on!

SHERINGHAM (*furious*) I shall not—er—keep my hair on, sir. I never—ssh! Was that a carriage stopped outside?

TOM. (*going to window*) Yes. There's a lady getting out.

SHERINGHAM. (*nervously*) What sort of a lady?

TOM. Oh, just an ordinary sort. Rather decent looking, with grey hair and feathers.

SHERINGHAM. Lady Pilkington! (*in an agony of apprehension*) Could any situation be more embarrassing?

TOM (*leaving window*) Well, what d'you want me to do?

SHERINGHAM. Listen. I shall suggest that you leave us alone for ten minutes. When you return you will be prepared with an ample apology, in your own words. You understand? Meanwhile I shall endeavour to explain.

TOM. I swear, I *am* sorry to miss that!

SHERINGHAM. Hold your tongue, sir! How dare—
(*he stops abruptly as the door R. C. opens and LADY PILKINGTON comes quickly into the room. A pretty, well-preserved widow of about 35, fashionably dressed in outdoor garments.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Ah! Dean told me I should find you here (*gives him her hand*) I'm so sorry you had to wait. (*as she observes TOM*) Not alone?

SHERINGHAM (*constrained*) No. My nephew Tom. Mary's eldest. He—ah—accompanied me.

LADY PILKINGTON (*with a quick look of gratitude*) How thoughtful of you! (*crosses to TOM*) So you came with Uncle to see his old friend. That was nice.

TOM. (*evasively*) Not at all.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*moving towards bell*) Now let me ring for tea.

SHERINGHAM. Ah! One moment! Lady Pilkington, I have—er—a trifling request to make.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*pausing*) Indeed?

SHERINGHAM. Will you forgive me if I ask for two words with you alone?

LADY PILKINGTON. Alone?

SHERINGHAM. Yes. I thought if the boy could step into another room—

LADY PILKINGTON. (*a little puzzled*) Oh, certainly. There's my boudoir in here (*indicates door L.*)

SHERINGHAM. The very thing.

LADY PILKINGTON. You wouldn't mind, would you, dear, waiting in there for—(*looks inquiringly at SHERINGHAM.*)

SHERINGHAM. Ten minutes.

LADY PILKINGTON. Ten minutes. There are some jolly books,—and battle pictures.

TOM. Oh, thank you. I shan't be a bit dull! (*cross to door, pause*) "Good luck, Uncle Gus." *Exit L.*)

(*A slight pause, LADY PILKINGTON and MR. SHERINGHAM left alone, stand embarrassed for a moment.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Won't you sit down?

SHERINGHAM. Er—Thank you. *They sit.* SHERINGHAM *on sofa* R. C. LADY PILKINGTON *easy-chair* L. C. *Pause.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. What a delightful little fellow; so bright and original.

SHERINGHAM. Yes, very original. Lady Pilkington (*constrainedly*) You are no doubt wondering what can have been my reason for bringing the boy here this afternoon.

LADY PILKINGTON. No. I know it already,

SHERINGHAM. (*startled*) Eh?

LADY PILKINGTON. "You feared lest after what has happened we should not meet alone without embarrassment. It was like your kind self to think of it."

SHERINGHAM. Ah! Precisely. (*tries again*) "I gather that you were not altogether unprepared for my visit."

LADY PILKINGTON (*nervously*) I thought it possible you would come.

SHERINGHAM. (*equally nervously*) The fact is, Lady Pilkington, I have a little explanation that it is perhaps due to myself that I should make. (*pause*) It is—ah—about that letter.

LADY PILKINGTON. My dear friend, surely no explanation is needed. The letter itself was enough. It told me everything.

SHERINGHAM. Oh, did it? (*awkwardly*) I mean, you've kept it? (*smiling*)

LADY PILKINGTON. You speak as though you were anxious to get it back. (*A slight pause, then in a different tone*) But do not think I shall ever part with it.

SHERINGHAM. Why?

LADY PILKINGTON. You really ask me that?

SHERINGHAM. Of course.

LADY PILKINGTON. Because it made me more proud than anything I have ever read in my life.

SHERINGHAM. (*uncertain how to take this*) Indeed?

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. (*slightly agitated, rises, walks away from him and fingers roses in a bowl*) To know, even though what you asked was impossible, that you had cared enough for me to ask it. Surely you can understand.

SHERINGHAM. (*suddenly seeing from her tone that his errand is an impossibility. To himself*) No. No. I can't! I can't do it.

LADY PILKINGTON. No. (*turning*) How then can I make it clearer?

SHERINGHAM. No, not that. I was thinking of something else. I understand only too well. (*romantically. Changes to easier manner*) You did not care for me.

LADY PILKINGTON. Ah no, no! Indeed you must not think that.

SHERINGHAM. And yet you refused me.

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes.

SHERINGHAM. (*curiously*) But why? I confess,

Annette, now that the whole matter is definitely over, I should at least like to know why.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*down again to l. c.*) I suppose you have a right to ask that. And yet—it is so difficult sometimes for a woman to explain her reasons.

SHERINGHAM. But you gave no hint in your answer. If, as you say, it was not that I am personally distasteful to you—

LADY PILKINGTON. Surely you must understand that it was not that. But—

SHERINGHAM. Yes?

LADY PILKINGTON. We have known each other too long, you and I, for any nonsense of sentiment.

SHERINGHAM. (*enjoying himself immensely*) Our engagement could have been the shorter. And so, Annette, for this—no reason-at-all, you have condemned me to solitude. (*sighs comfortably*) Ah cruel! Cruel!

LADY PILKINGTON. My dear friend, is it possible that you have not yet seen the absurdity of wishing to marry an old woman?

SHERINGHAM. Old—Bah! Perish the thought! You have the advantage of me by years.

LADY PILKINGTON. A man is different. A bachelor is a mere lad at sixty.

SHERINGHAM. Because he has never really lived.

LADY PILKINGTON. Then (*hesitates*) Your views are not altered even now?

SHERINGHAM. Can you ask it?

LADY PILKINGTON. And you still wish to hear my reason for replying to you as I did?

SHERINGHAM. Naturally, to be sure.

LADY PILKINGTON. Then I will tell you. It was because—having to answer you immediately—I wrote in such haste that perhaps—

SHERINGHAM. (*encouragingly*) Perhaps—?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*softly*) I did not wait to know my own mind. And now, Augustus, my answer is "Yes."

SHERINGHAM. (*suddenly sitting bolt upright*) What?

LADY PILKINGTON. Is it so strange? The woman's privilege. I am an old woman, but not yet a wise one. Could you not see what has been making me so nervous?

SHERINGHAM. (*blankly*) I—I see.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*crossing to him*) Dear, how startled you look! (*cloyly*) If—if you too had regretted your decision, you should never have known.

SHERINGHAM. No?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*gives him her hand*) No. That was my cunning, to find out before I told you.

SHERINGHAM. Ah!

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. You're going to marry a very cunning woman Augustus. (*breaking off*) How we shall astonish people.

SHERINGHAM. Yes. It's a bit of a surprise—for everybody.

LADY PILKINGTON. You and I engaged! How strange that sounds! I can hardly believe it even yet. It's all somehow like dream, isn't it?

SHERINGHAM. Yes. (*pinches himself in the leg*) Ah!

LADY PILKINGTON. What is it?

SHERINGHAM. I was only pinching myself, that's all.

LADY PILKINGTON. Foolish person. (*pause*) Augustus.

SHERINGHAM. Yes.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*embarrassed*) Oh, nothing, nothing.

SHERINGHAM. (*rousing himself*) Won't you sit down—er—here?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*seats herself L. of him on sofa*) Now, Augustus, you mustn't think, just because you've bullied me into saying "yes," that there need be any foolishness between us.

SHERINGHAM. But—

LADY PILKINGTON. Perhaps, if you insist, one then.

SHERINGHAM. (*kisses her diffidently on right cheek*)
Do you know, Annette, that you are quite remarkably pretty.

LADY PILKINGTON. Flatterer!

SHERINGHAM. It's perfectly true. I—I never noticed it before.

LADY PILKINGTON. You've forgiven me, then.

SHERINGHAM. For what? (*seated, left arm around her*)

LADY PILKINGTON. For playing with you as I did.

SHERINGHAM. Of course, of course.

LADY PILKINGTON. Tell me, Augustus. (*blissfully*)
What first determined you to write that letter?

SHERINGHAM. (*horrified at remembering TOM*) That—letter?

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. What's the matter?
You look almost ill!

SHERINGHAM. Nothing. Nothing. I—(*he is interrupted by a noise of banging on the inside of door L.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. What's that? (*alarmed, looking towards MR. SHERINGHAM for an explanation*)

SHERINGHAM. The boy.

LADY PILKINGTON. Oh! We forgot all about him!
How could we?

(*Rises and moves quickly towards door.*)

SHERINGHAM. (*following her hastily*) Perhaps I'd better just step into the other room first and acquaint him with what has happened.

LADY PILKINGTON. No. (*laughing*) Don't. Let's see if he guesses anything.

SHERINGHAM. (*apprehensively*) But indeed I think—

LADY PILKINGTON. Silence! I forbid you to say a word. (*calls*) Come in.

(*Enter TOM L. He comes in cautiously, looking from one to the other.*)

TOM. (*showing watch*) You've had eleven and a half minutes.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*lightly*) Yes. And one can hear a lot in eleven and a half minutes.

TOM. I couldn't! (*then penitently to her*) I say, are you very waxy?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*buzzled*) Waxy?

TOM. Because I'm most awfully sorry, really.

LADY PILKINGTON. I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Sorry, what for?

SHERINGHAM. (*bustling between them hastily in the endeavour to stifle TOM's disclosure*) Oh, it's nothing, nothing. Some—er—childish peccadillo. We'll hear no more about it.

TOM. But, Uncle Augustus, I've been thinking it over, and I do truly want to apologise, me myself.

SHERINGHAM. Very well—er—that'll do. We accept your apology, (*in a furious aside to him*) Be quiet!

LADY PILKINGTON. But you forget. I am entirely in the dark. What is this terrible crime?

SHERINGHAM. (*laughing forcedly*) Oh a trifle. Nothing of any consequence. Is it, Tom? (*meaningly to him*) Nothing, I say, of any consequence.

TOM. (*puzzled*) Well, you said the consequence might have been worse.

SHERINGHAM. Ah, precisely. That's enough about it.

LADY PILKINGTON. But at least let me hear the offence. Don't be afraid to speak, dear. Have you (*with an inspiration*) broken something?

SHERINGHAM. (*catching at the idea*) Yes, that's it. A—a little vase of some sort that stood—(*vaguely*) about here. He was afraid you might be very angry, and in short (*finding TOM's eyes on him with an expression of astonishment and reproof, he breaks off abruptly*) I think we ought to be running away now.

LADY PILKINGTON. Oh! as if I could be vexed about a trifle like that, (*glancing fondly at SHERINGHAM*) especially to-day. (*to TOM*) You mustn't think any more about it. And now we'll have tea. (*up to bell L. and rings*)

TOM. But Uncle said—(*crossing R.*)

SHERINGHAM. Really, I think we must be going. (*up after her, then turns to TOM, aside*) Hold your tongue! (*holding out hand*) Good-bye, Lady Pilkington.

LADY PILKINGTON. Nonsense. Going already after—after what has happened. I refuse to hear of such a thing. Sit down both of you. (*moves down L. C.* SHERINGHAM *crosses down R. C.*)

TOM. (*bewildered. C.*) After what's happened?

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. (*to SHERINGHAM*) I think we must tell him now after all. (*seated L. C.*) Come here you hardened criminal. (*motions TOM to sit on arm of her chair*) Tom, dear, what would you think about the idea of a new auntie?

TOM. (*aggrieved*) But you just told me *not* to think about it any more.

LADY PILKINGTON. "Any more"? Really, Augustus, is the boy quite right in his head?

SHERINGHAM. Yes, yes. He's a little muddled, that's all. The fact is, Tom, Lady Pilkington and I are—She is going to be your new aunt. (*sits R. C.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes, Tom. Uncle Augustus and I are engaged to be married.

TOM. Engaged? (*looks from one to the other with dawning apprehension, then goes into fits of laughter*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Tom! (*rises indignant*) Oh, you very rude little boy!

SHERINGHAM. Where are your manners? Be silent, sir!

TOM. (*between his gasps*) Oh—I'm awfully sorry, only—if you only knew—it's so jolly funny.

LADY PILKINGTON. What is funny? If we only knew what?

SHERINGHAM. (*in an agony*) Be—be careful, sir!

TOM. (*comprehensive glance at SHERINGHAM*) Nothing much. Only—I thought of this before anybody.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*delighted*) You rogue. Is that all? I declare you're quite a little match-maker, isn't he, Augustus?

SHERINGHAM. (*wiping his brow*) Quite.

LADY PILKINGTON. And you shall be chief guest at our wedding. That's only fair. It's a thousand pities that you can't give the bride away.

TOM. (*innocently*) I might give Uncle Augustus away though.

SHERINGHAM. (*uneasy smile*) Don't be absurd.

(*Enter DEAN with tea.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Ah, here is tea at last. Thank you, Dean, here, please. (*as DEAN puts tea near LADY PILKINGTON, TOM saunters carelessly round behind sofa in which SHERINGHAM is seated*)

TOM. (*aside to him*) I say, I have got you now, Uncle Gus.

SHERINGHAM. (*furiously to him*) You dare to say a word!

TOM. You wait. Aren't you just jolly well on toast though?

SHERINGHAM. Little fiend! (*he chokes*)

LADY PILKINGTON. (*absently*) What's that about toast? There's a plate full here.

DEAN. Yes, m' lady. I ordered an extra supply on account of the little gentleman.

LADY PILKINGTON. Thanks, Dean, that'll do.

DEAN. Very good, m' lady. (*exit.*)

TOM. (*crossing c.*) Dean seems an awfully nice old man, doesn't he?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*smiling*) You think so? Here, Tom dear, take this cup to Uncle Augustus. Why?

TOM (*taking cup to SHERINGHAM*) Oh, I don't know. He looks so straightforward and honest. (*making faces at SHERINGHAM as he hands cup*)

LADY PILKINGTON. (*laughing*) Oh, I believe he's quite honest. D'you like a little cream in the tea, Tom?

TOM. Well, I, really like a little tea in the cream. Only I'm not allowed. (*back to chair c. L. of tea-table*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Well, there. (*putting cream in*) Don't tell anybody.

TOM. I say, thanks awfully. (*takes tea, they eat,*
LADY PILKINGTON, L., TOM C., SHERINGHAM R.)

TOM. (*eating*) I suppose you'll have stacks and stacks of presents.

LADY PILKINGTON. Why do you suppose that?

TOM. People that don't want 'em always do. Now I think—

LADY PILKINGTON. Well?

TOM. I think the people that don't have the wedding ought to have the presents.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*amused*) Oh, that's your idea, is it?

TOM. Yes. (*pauses, takes more cake, looks slyly at SHERINGHAM*) only what are called "deserving cases" of course.

LADY PILKINGTON. Really. For instance?

TOM. (*airily*) For instance, me. I might happen to want an—an air gun.

SHERINGHAM. (*with irritation*) I entirely fail to see what you have done to deserve one.

TOM. Oh, it isn't only what a person does that deserves. Sometimes it's what he doesn't do.

LADY PILKINGTON. Doesn't do?

TOM. Yes, or (*meaningly*) doesn't say. Isn't it, Uncle Gus?

SHERINGHAM. I—I'm sure I don't know.

TOM. As a matter of fact though, Uncle Gus was to give me an air gun anyhow.

LADY PILKINGTON. Was he? How very kind!

SHERINGHAM. I—I assure you I had—

TOM. Yes. As a deserving case.

SHERINGHAM. Well, perhaps, perhaps. We'll see!

TOM. (*dreamily*) A great big proper air gun that'll kill things.

LADY PILKINGTON. Blood-thirsty monster!

TOM. (*all the time watching SHERINGHAM slyly out of the corner of his eye*) With a great, big h-u-g-e target.

SHERINGHAM. B'rr! (*chokes into cup*)

TOM. And (*to* LADY PILKINGTON) Slugs of course.

LADY PILKINGTON. Oh, slugs of course!

TOM. Yes. Isn't it decent of him?

LADY PILKINGTON. But will you be allowed to have such murderous weapons at school?

TOM. Rather not. They won't go to Winchelsea. They'll wait till the holidays.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*reflectively*) Winchelsea?

TOM. Yes. That's where I'm at school you know. Beastly hole!

LADY PILKINGTON. I was trying to think where quite recently I'd seen that on an envelope.

TOM. Whew! (*makes secret sign to SHERINGHAM, rises.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Oh, of course! Why, (*to SHERINGHAM*) your letter, *the* letter, was postmarked from there.

SHERINGHAM. Oh—er—was it? (*TOM crosses to arm of sofa above SHERINGHAM*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. What were you doing at Winchelsea yesterday?

SHERINGHAM. (*confused*) Well—er—as a matter of fact—

TOM. Uncle Gus came down to see me there.

LADY PILKINGTON. Oh, to see you at school?

TOM. (*glibly*) Yes. To ask if I could come up to town this afternoon. (*to SHERINGHAM*) Didn't you? (*nudging him*) Here, give me that cup, you'll drop it. (*takes cup to table L. C. and returns*)

SHERINGHAM (*plunging recklessly*) Yes, the fact is I was dining with Mary the night before last—the 21st, it's their wedding day—and she happened to mention the lad, so I said to myself "I'll—er—I'll run down and look him up."

LADY PILKINGTON. How like you! To think of a schoolboy even at such a moment.

SHERINGHAM. (*embarrassed*) Not at all.

TOM. (*seated affectionately on the arm of sofa*) Oh, that's nothing. He's always thinking of me. He's

thinking of me now, aren't you, Uncle Gus? (*leans towards him*)

SHERINGHAM. Yes. (*vindictively*) In a way

LADY PILKINGTON. But—how foolish of me—of course for that letter to reach me yesterday, it must have been posted on Thursday,

SHERINGHAM. (*confused*) Oh—was it?

LADY PILKINGTON. Surely, you ought to know. Then it was really the day before yesterday that you went to Winchelsea?

SHERINGHAM. Yes. No. That is, yes: it must have been.

LADY PILKINGTON. You seem somewhat vague about it. However, we can easily settle the matter. I have the letter here,

(*Rises and turns away from him to desk L. C. which she unlocks.*)

SHERINGHAM. (*aside, agonised*) Great Heavens!

TOM. (*standing in front of sofa, aside to him*) You've done it now. I should own up if I were you.

SHERINGHAM. Own up! (*frenzied*) It's *you* that have got to own up. I've done nothing.

TOM. No. But it's you that'll get the row.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*standing by desk*) Ah, here we are. Yes, "Winchelsea, June 21st." that proves it.

SHERINGHAM. Exactly. That—that proves it.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*coming down c. reading post-mark*) "Collected at 10 p. m., that's strange too.

SHERINGHAM. (*apprehensively*) Why?

LADY PILKINGTON. Because that evening you were dining in town with your sister. You told me so yourself.

SHERINGHAM. Yes. I did. (*suddenly rises*) Annette, I give in. I fling myself on your mercy.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*alarmed*) What *do* you mean?

SHERINGTON. That letter—the letter you have in your hand.

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes?

SHERINGHAM. (*brokenly*) I didn't write it.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*mystified*) Didn't write—then who did?

TOM. (*doggedly*) I did. (*he is between them, a little behind*)

LADY PILKINGTON. You? (*to SHERINGHAM*) You mean that you dictated—this—to him?

SHERINGHAM. No. I mean—(*hopelessly*) Annette! Can't you understand?

LADY PILKINGTON. I'm afraid I don't.

TOM. (*interposing, comes down, same tone of dogged confession*) It's all my fault. What Uncle Augustus really means, is that I wrote that letter, me—myself, without him. I did it because I thought it funny. I imitated his handwriting. He brought me here to apologise, and then afterwards he wouldn't let me, because—(*hesitates*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Because—(*with dawning comprehension*) Ah!

SHERINGHAM. (*imploringly*) Annette! If I could but persuade you to believe—

LADY PILKINGTON. (*sharply*) Oh, if you please one moment! Don't speak to me just yet! (*thinking*) I see. So that was why—I see it all now. And I was—taken in. I believed that you—Oh, it's (*tearing note convulsively*) rather funny, isn't it?

SHERINGHAM. Annette, what can I say?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*hardly*) Oh, there's no need to say anything. I quite see the—the humour of the situation. In a day or two I shall laugh over it as much as you, only—you'll give me a day or two first.

SHERINGHAM. (*crosses L. towards her. TOM sits on sofa*) Annette, I won't have you treating it like this. (*earnestly*) I swear to you that what I said just now was the truth, that I meant every word of it. I ask you by everything I hold most sacred, as sincerely and earnestly as I know how, I ask you to be my wife.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*trying to appear unconcerned*) Yes. You—you couldn't well say much more than that, could you? Or much less, I suppose, now?

Only—you seem to forget that gentlemen don't as a rule remain where their presence is obviously not desired.

TOM. Oh dear, that's below the belt; because (*rises*) if you put it that way I suppose I must go. (*up towards door, he turns as SHERINGHAM did*) But, (*elaborate burlesque of SHERINGHAM'S farewell*) understand, if I leave this house now, it's for good. You won't see me again.

LADY PILKINGTON. I don't want to. Surely you've done enough already! (*is turning away, puts handkerchief to eyes, almost breaks down. TOM sees this and his manner entirely alters. He comes quickly round L. so as to face her*)

TOM. (*entreatingly*) Oh, I say! I'm so beastly sorry. Don't blub about it. I'd no idea you cared so much, really. Honest injun! I hadn't, or I wouldn't have played the fool like that. I *am* a little beast. Oh, please, don't mind.

LADY PILKINGTON. (*has sunk into chair L. Holds his hand*) There, I'm all right now. And not angry. How could you possibly understand! Will you give me a kiss?

TOM. Yes. If you like. (*with an effort*)

LADY PILKINGTON. There (*clasps him in her arms*) Now good-bye.

TOM. I say! You do squeeze.

LADY PILKINGTON. Did I? I'm sorry. (*drying her eyes*) You see I don't often have people to hug now-a-days.

TOM. (*pleasantly*) And you easily get out of practise, don't you? (*from his position L. of LADY PILKINGTON he catches sight of SHERINGHAM, who has reappeared in doorway R. C.*)

SHERINGHAM. (*loud whisper*) Tom! Come here. (*beckons*)

(TOM without altering his voice comes round R. of LADY PILKINGTON and with his hand behind him beckons SHERINGHAM forward)

TOM. (*continuing*) It's like everything else, I suppose, it wants keeping up. (SHERINGHAM *is advancing on tiptoe*)

LADY PILKINGTON (*without turning*) Yes. I suppose so.

TOM. And you can't well do that sort of thing by yourself can you? (SHERINGHAM *gradually advancing on tiptoe*)

LADY PILKINGTON. No. And I shall be a good deal by myself now.

TOM. What you want is someone to practise with. (SHERINGHAM *being now near, TOM catches his hand and draws him closer*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. But who? (*feels for his left hand without looking round, pats it gently*) Would you come sometimes? I shall be a very lonely old woman now, remember. (SHERINGHAM *attentive*)

TOM. (*takes her hand, draws it towards SHERINGHAM'S*) I might, (*slyly*) if Uncle would let me.

LADY PILKINGTON. Uncle?

TOM. Yes. (*steps back*)

LADY PILKINGTON. (*looks up, sees SHERINGHAM*) You!

SHERINGHAM. Yes, Annette, me. I ask your pardon for this second intrusion. It was—er—not altogether intentional on my part. (TOM *moves down R. and sits on sofa*)

LADY PILKINGTON. I thought you had gone!

SHERINGHAM. Practically I had. There was some slight delay in finding a cab, that's all. It is waiting outside now.

LADY PILKINGTON. Then why have you come back?

SHERINGHAM. I was obliged to. To see what had become of him.

LADY PILKINGTON. Him!

SHERINGHAM. (*points to TOM*) That!

LADY PILKINGTON. (*half despairingly*) Oh, the boy. Always the boy!

TOM. I told you so.

SHERINGHAM. Yes. I had not intended to trouble you again. I meant only to beckon to him from the door. But, Annette—er—something drew me forward, and being here I couldn't help overhearing a word you used just now.

LADY PILKINGTON. Indeed?

SHERINGHAM. Yes. It's true of me too. I—er—felt it as soon as I got outside this room, when I was whistling for that confounded cab—Lonely. Annette, we're two lonely old people. Can't we keep each other company?

LADY PILKINGTON. Again?

SHERINGHAM. Yes, again. Give me one more chance. Forget everything that's past, remember only that now I love you.

LADY PILKINGTON. You love me?

SHERINGHAM. Yes, I—I don't quite know when it began, but it's certainly there. Annette, putting aside all our mistakes and blunders, imagining that now for the first time I ask you, sincerely and humbly, to be my wife, couldn't you—consider it?

TOM. (*eagerly springing up and crossing c.*) Oh, if you please, do for goodness' sake consider it.

SHERINGHAM. (*furiously*) Tom! Be quiet!

LADY PILKINGTON. (*stoops to embrace TOM*) No. Don't be cross with him. That would be ungrateful.

SHERINGHAM. Ungrateful!

LADY PILKINGTON. Yes. Because—if—if I did consider it again, don't you see that, (*looks to SHERINGHAM*) that it would be his doing after all?

SHERINGHAM. Annette! That means you will?

LADY PILKINGTON. (*smiling*) Well, he seems to insist upon it, doesn't he? (*SHERINGHAM takes her hand fondly*)

TOM. Three cheers! I always knew you were jolly keen on him, really. (*slightly up c.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Ridiculous boy! But, (*shyly to SHERINGHAM*) you're quite sure you mean it this time, Augustus?

NOV 15 1903

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A BOY'S PROPOSAL.

SHERINGHAM. Mean it? My darling! (*about to embrace her*)

TOM. I say, don't mind me, I've finished here! (*down R.*)

LADY PILKINGTON. Finished?

TOM. Yes. Half a jiff. I'm going out for a walk. Good-bye, Uncle Gus, (*shakes hands*) Good-bye, (*meaningly*) Aunt Annette! And thank you very much for a very nice afternoon. (*up stage C.*)

SHERINGHAM. Stop, sir. Where are you going?

TOM. (*at door R. C.*) Oh, that's all right. I can find my way. I'm going to order an air-gun (*makes motion of shooting them. They stand backs to audience watching him. Exit TOM*)

CURTAIN.

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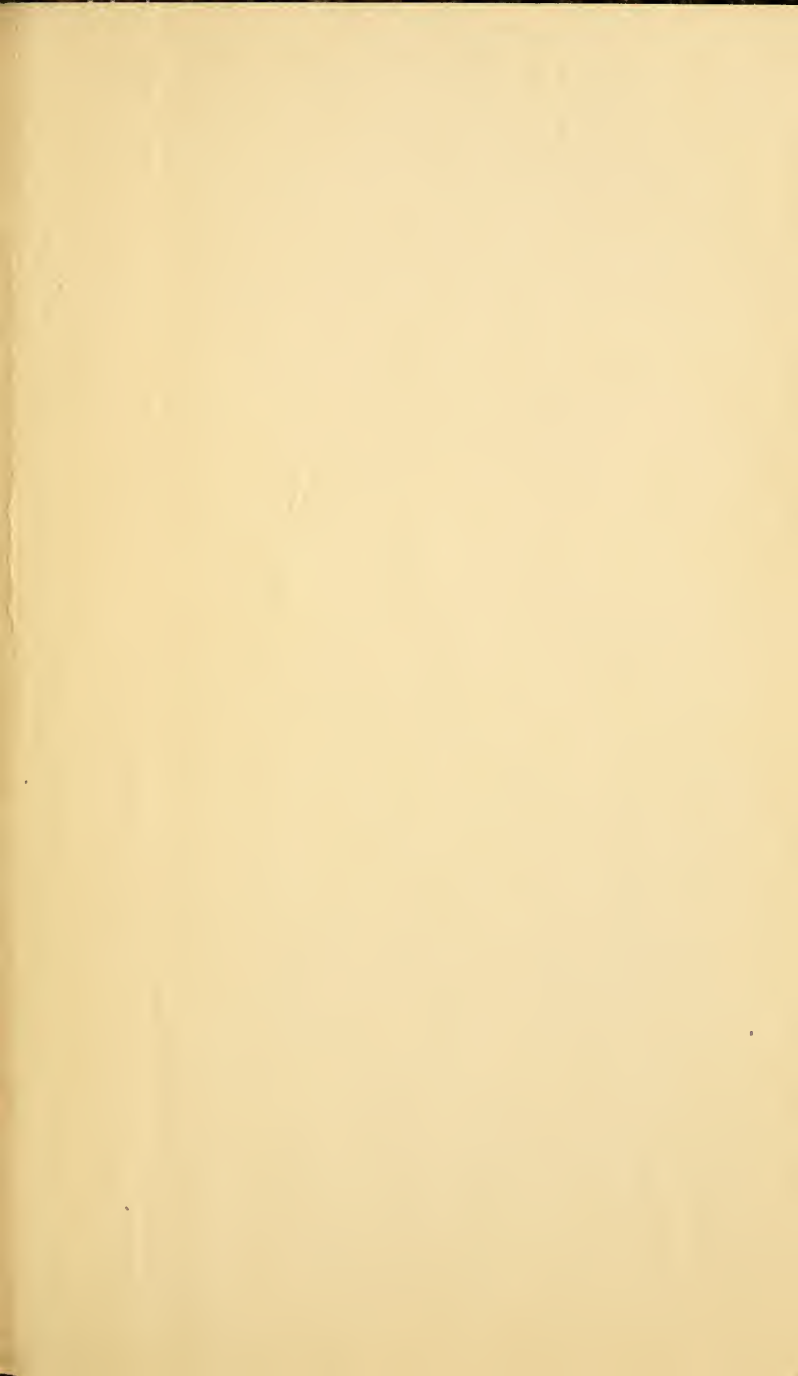
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